**Democratic Innovations in Central and Eastern Europe: Expanding the Research Agenda**

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**Abstract**

Democratic innovations have recently gained momentum throughout the world. An increasing number of such practices takes place and coincide with a visible grow in the number of analyses focusing on the forms, functioning and effects of democratic innovations. In spite of these developments, a great deal of research on democratic innovations have largely neglected Central and Eastern Europe. This special issue of *Contemporary Politics* adds to the existing literature on democratic innovations by focusing on such attempts to deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process in Central and Eastern Europe. Its attempt to expand the research agenda relies on new empirical evidence relative to three major forms of democratic innovations (direct democracy, deliberative democracy and citizens' involvement with the aid of ICTs).

**Keywords**: democratic innovations, citizens, Central and Eastern Europe

**Introduction**

In recent decades the process of political representation has faced several challenges and problems (Ruth, Welp, & Whitehead, 2016). According to most conventional assessments, citizens have become increasingly discontent and gradually abandoned the traditional forms

of political participation: electoral turnout is in decline, party membership shrinks, and the amount of loyal voters seemingly decreases from year to year. On top of all of that comes a general lack of trust in political institutions, parties and political leaders (Amnå & Ekman, 2013; Dalton, 2008; Norris, 1999, 2011; Putnam, 2000; Skocpol & Fiorina, 1999). Scholars and politicians pin their hopes on participatory innovations as a means to cure this democratic malaise (Geissel & Newton, 2012). Several governments in established democracies at both national and local levels have gone down the participatory route and implemented various kinds of democratic innovations that allow citizens to make their voices heard (Altman, 2011; Buss, Redburn, & Guo, 2016; Geissel & Joas, 2013; Gherghina & Groh, 2016; Kriesi, 2005; LeDuc, 2003; Smith, 2009). Such innovations range from direct democracy (e.g. referendums, agenda initiatives, and recall procedures) to deliberative practices like deliberative polling, consultative mini-publics, or participatory budgeting (Geissel & Gherghina, 2016; Gronlund, Bachtiger, & Setala, 2014; Sintomer, Traub-Merz, & Zhang, 2012) – in offline as well as online settings (Knobloch & Gastil, 2014; Tomšič & Kleindienst, 2017). In addition to direct and deliberative (or dialogue oriented) procedures, the literature also identifies a third form, which is usually a mixture between the two. This third category is very broad and a large variety of innovations are included as long as they provide an avenue for citizens' involvement that is complementary to the current system of political representation.

As for more specific definitions, democratic innovations may be understood in the following way: they are institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process. Such institutions are "innovations" since they "represent a departure from the traditional institutional architecture that we normally attribute to advanced industrial democracies" (Smith 2009: 1). Sometimes cooperation between state actors and non-state actors (like civil society) is also seen as way

of involving citizens to a higher extent into the political process (Geissel & Joas, 2013), and it has moreover been claimed for a long time that participation in deliberative procedures would improve citizens' political efficacy (Elstub & McLaverty, 2014; Geissel & Hess, 2017).

To better understand the complexity of this picture, a closer look at the forms, functioning and effects of these democratic innovations in different contexts is necessary. In particular, this special issue of *Contemporary Politics* adds to the existing literature on democratic innovations by focusing on such attempts to deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process in Central and Eastern Europe. There are three general forms of democratic innovation addressed by the articles of this special issue: direct democracy, deliberative practices and citizen involvement with the aid of technology. These forms are the ones usually agreed by the literature (see above). The analyses include a broad variety of countries ranging from new democracies (Bulgaria, Poland and Slovakia) or countries under the threat of de-democratization (Hungary and Romania) to democratizing or transition countries (Moldova, Serbia and Ukraine). We get back to these in detail when describing the contribution brought by this collection to the state of the art. Before that, let the following section provides an overview of the state of the art of democratic innovations in Central and Eastern Europe.

**Central and Eastern Europe: A relatively neglected region**

It has often been noted that research on political participation and civic engagement – a vast and constantly growing research field (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Barrett & Zani, 2015; Berger, 2009; Ekman & Amnå, 2012; van Deth, Montero, & Westholm, 2007) – has for a long time focused mainly on Western democracies, and that citizen involvement in politics as voters, activists or protesters have for a long time been regarded as a marginal phenomenon in

Central and Eastern Europe (Bernhagen & Marsh, 2007; Hooghe & Quintelier, 2013; Howard, 2003; Kostelka, 2014; Vrablikova, 2013). This notion has been challenged in recent years, in studies on civic activities and political interest in Eastern Europe (Ekman, Gherghina, & Podolian, 2016; Marchenko, 2016), in research on social movements and post-communist civil society mobilization (Jacobsson, 2015), and in studies on radical political movements in Central and Eastern Europe (Wennerhag, Fröhlich, & Piotrowski, 2018). Still, the general consensus in the literature on citizen participation has for a long time been that levels of political participation are generally lower and civil society is typically weaker in Central and Eastern Europe, compared to Western Europe and Scandinavia.

That may be one reason for which research on democratic innovations have largely neglected the Central and Eastern European region. For example, Smith's seminal *Democratic Innovations* (2009) draws on empirical observations from Brazil, Canada, the US and Switzerland, Geissel and Joas' *Participatory Democratic Innovations in Europe* (2013) focuses mainly on Western and Northern Europe, and Knobloch and Gastil's "Civic (Re) socialisation: The Educative Effects of Deliberative Participation" (2014) on Australia and the US. The same goes for *Evaluating Democratic Innovations* by Geissel and Newton (2012), and in a similar way, Setälä and Schiller's volume on *Referendums and Representative Democracy* (2009) features case studies on Ireland, Canada, California, Israel, Southern Europe, the Nordic countries and the Netherlands.

The assumption, as it were, seems to have been that "democratic innovations" is not really what you would expect to find in Central and Eastern Europe. And for sure, a lot of studies in recent years have focused on challenges to democracy rather than on democratic innovativeness. Following the 2004, 2007 and 2013 Eastern enlargements of the EU – sometimes described as a "return to Europe" following decades of communist rule – we have

throughout the post-communist region witnessed what has sometimes been labelled "democratic backsliding", Euroscepticism, the rise of radical right populism, the spread of corruption, an authoritarian backlash and the rise of xenophobia and chauvinism. At the same time, this development has not followed a singular course in Central and Eastern Europe, and not everybody agrees that we should talk about a general backlash or democratic backsliding in the region. And, for the present special issue, the crucial point is that depicting Central and Eastern Europe as democratically backward is not the full story. In fact, after undergoing the regime change or (re)gaining state independence in the early 1990s, the post-communist countries in the region swiftly adopted many provisions and regulations about democratic innovations in general and direct democracy in particular (Gherghina, 2017a; Walter-Rogg, 2008).

To date, there is still only a limited amount of studies that have reflected on post-communist examples of democratic innovations. Even the handful of studies that have in fact included the region, have done so in a quite general manner rather than closely investigating the processes and mechanisms. When referring to direct democracy in the region, one approach has been to include it in broader comparisons with other parts of the world or of the continent, in particular when it comes to referendums. For example, in their account of the referendum and initiative process in Europe, Kaufmann and Waters (2004) conduct an analysis of EU member states and thus explicitly compare the Western and Eastern European countries in a historical perspective. In a similar way, both Buttler and Ranney (1994) and Qvortrup (2014) seek to provide an overview of the strengths and weaknesses, as well as the increased popularity, and the use of referendums around the world. They both have a chapter dedicated to the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in their studies. Moreover, Silagadze and Gherghina (2017) seek to understand when the policy subjected to popular vote is

accepted by the population and focuses on the top-down referendums organized in Europe between 2001 and 2013. Gherghina (2017a) further compares the forms of direct democracy available in Western and Eastern Europe and concludes that the countries belonging to the latter category had earlier provisions both at local and national level. The results show that referendums proposed by a large parliamentary majority or with clear messages from political parties during campaign are likely to be successful, a conclusion that is valid across the investigated countries without regional specificity. In his overview of the referendums organized in 11 East European countries, Gherghina (2017b) reveals the existence of important differences before and after the EU accession. Findings indicate that in the most recent decade the number of citizen-initiated referendums has increased, more referendums have passed, but the turnout has slowly decreased.

The literature on referendums – as one form of democratic innovations – have thus included Central and Eastern Europe, since the EU Eastern enlargement and the accession referendums attracted a lot of scholarly attention. Other forms of democratic innovations in Central and Eastern Europe have been less studied, for example innovations relating to deliberative democracy. One general perspective has been provided by Folscher (2007), who focus mainly on the context in which participatory budgeting takes place in Central and Eastern Europe, in order to present policy-related lessons from such deliberative practices. Also, there are a some single-case studies of deliberative practices in the region, that typically provide extensive descriptions of the processes, with rich details that can form the basis for further research. One of the studies that pursue an in-depth analysis of deliberative practices refers to the legitimacy of the constitutional forum organized in Romania in 2013 (Gherghina & Miscoiu, 2016). The authors use a tri-dimensional approach of legitimacy and their results

indicate that while input legitimacy was achieved, output legitimacy is mostly absent due to the lack of action from political parties.

Furthermore, there are a few case-studies on E-participation initiatives in the region. For example, Tomšič and Kleindienst (2017) have analyzed E-participation and E-democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, and more specifically, mechanisms initiated in order to enhance political engagement and political knowledge among citizens in Estonia, one of not only the region's but also the world's leaders in E-democracy (Jonsson, 2015). More studies are likely to emerge in the years to come. For example, the 2017 edition of the *Governance Report*, produced by the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin, focuses on democratic innovations: innovative policies and initiatives meant to address the causes of democratic malaise, to foster democratic resilience, and to enhance citizen participation. In the 2017 report, Smilov (2017) addresses democratic innovations and lessons from Eastern Europe.

This literature review indicates that most of the crucial elements of democratic innovations are at least touched upon in studies that include Central and Eastern Europe, at least when it comes to referendums. However, mere overviews of innovations and general descriptions of how they work are not sufficient to provide comparable empirical evidence; more systematic studies are needed. Thus, the ambition with this special issue is to expand the research agenda, by looking specifically at different kinds of democratic innovations in Central and Eastern Europe. We have made a point here to include not only direct democracy referendums, but also the two most frequently debated types of democratic innovations found in the research literature, namely deliberative democracy practices and E-participation (Geissel & Gherghina, 2016; Gronlund et al., 2014; Knobloch & Gastil, 2014; Sintomer et al., 2012; Tomšič & Kleindienst, 2017).

In addition to expanding the research literature by covering more empirical cases, this is also in many ways a timely issue. Very recently, we have witnessed a number of relevant developments in the politics of the region, like for example the "Black Protest" marches in Poland, that started in the fall of 2016, when a massive number of people took to the streets in order to protest against the proposed total ban on abortion. Since then, similar marches have been organised by e.g. women's rights activists, in Poland and elsewhere. The large anti-corruption protests in Budapest, in the spring of 2017, is another case in point. When the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest, Hungary, was attacked by Viktor Orbán, tens of thousands of people took to the streets, in protests that resonated worldwide. Thus, the actions of ordinary citizens in Central and Eastern Europe have in some places challenged the contemporary political order, and grassroots movements and diverse forms of mobilization have challenged the notion of weak civil societies in the East. In fact, some scholars have argued that what we have witnessed in recent years in a number of places in the region represent nothing short of a new phase in the development of civil societies in Central and Eastern Europe (Jacobsson, 2015). Consequently, we are well advised not to keep neglecting the potential power of ordinary citizens in Central and Eastern Europe, and we thus also need to pay closer attention to constitutional and institutional arrangements designed to deepen citizen participation in the political processes in the post-communist countries.

**The contribution of this special issue**

This special issue of *Contemporary Politics* adds to the existing body of literature on democratic innovations by including examples from a number of countries in Central and Eastern Europe. This entails providing new empirical evidence that illustrates attempts to deepen citizen involvement in political contexts sometimes quite different from the

democratic political systems in the US, South America, Western Europe and Scandinavia. Here, the idea is thus to use lessons from a still largely underexplored part of Europe in order to complement or revise theoretical approaches and empirical results in existing studies on democratic innovations. Our hope is that the contributions of this special issue will present new empirical findings and theoretical insights that will go beyond the comparative study of Central and Eastern Europe, and have broader implications for the study of citizen behavior and democratic innovations in political systems all over the globe. The articles are clustered in three main categories of innovations: direct democracy, citizen involvement with the aid of technology and deliberative democracy.

The direct democracy is reflected through three different approaches in the special issue. First, its most common form is the referendum and two articles look at crucial elements: the relationship between parties and voters and the role of referendum campaigns in voting decision. Second, the recall procedure is quite rare in practice and the article about the recall of the mayor from the capital city of Republic of Moldova provides useful insights into the subject matter. Third, the use of direct democracy seen as broad complementary to representative democracy, are closely analysed in Hungary. To begin with the contributions on referendums, Nemčok and Spáč examine the role of partisan cues on voter mobilization in the 2015 "Family" referendum in Slovakia, dealing with the rights of sexual minorities. Conventional wisdom tells us that distinct partisan cues are of central importance for the way people will vote in a referendum, but less is known about partisan cues and the decision to vote or not in a referendum, which is certainly a crucial issue. Indeed, the very act of *not* turning up to vote in a referendum may in some cases be regarded as a strategic decision, in order to invalidate or de-legitimize the referendum as shown by Gherghina and Miscoiu (2013). Drawing on a pre-referendum survey, Nemčok and Spáč show that clear party cues

about turning up to vote or not seem to work, in the same way as party cues on which side to vote for. Moreover, as the Slovak case illustrates, in certain institutional settings the mobilization recommendations from parties can have an even stronger impact on voters than cues about which side to vote for.

Referendum campaigns are central to Gherghina and Silagadze's contribution. Referendum campaigns typically differ from election campaigns, in a number of ways. Party positions are not seldom less clear, since the parties may be internally divided over the issue at stake. Also, referendums may be perceived by voters as less important and/or as more demanding than regular elections (i.e. the notion of second-order elections). In the literature on the way citizens vote in referendums, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the actual campaigns themselves, as explanatory variables for the outcome. To fill this gap in the literature, Gherghina and Silagadze argue that the actual referendum campaign is an important predictor of the voting decision. Three referendums are used to demonstrate this point, organized in 2015–2016 in different East European countries (Bulgaria, Poland and Slovakia).

Moving on the to the recall procedure, Miscoiu analyses the failure of such a vote in Republic of Moldova. Although it happened at local level, in the capital city Chisinau with the aim to dismiss the mayor from office, this was not limited to local politics. Instead, the vote was cast on broader issues and the symbolic or perceived stakes were much greater than the office itself. The contribution illustrates the borders of democratic innovations and how they can challenge the playing field set up by the political elites. The qualitative evidence from the focus groups conducted by the author at the end of 2017 reveal complex mechanisms behind voters' decision to support the mayor. This type of information nuances earlier research focusing on the determinants of voting in referendums.

The general approach on direct democracy rests on the notion of a democratic malaise or crisis. This is the point of departure for Pallingér's contribution in this special issue. While democracy in a manner of speaking is "always" in crisis since it always needs to be reformulated, the situation in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe still seems to be more serious than in Western Europe. Recently, instances of corruption, the abuse of power, the repression of media, and attempts to break the constraints of checks and balances and to centralise executive power has gone hand in hand with the intensification of nationalist and populist politics, in a number of countries in the region. In this context, Hungary seems to represent a special case: "The case of Hungary remains the most puzzling. While it was set as a model of democratic consolidation in the EU's post-communist space, it also experienced the most severe challenges to democratic institutions that have taken place in the region since the end of communism" (Herman, 2006, p. 258). In this situation, when the room for manoeuvre of the opposition is limited and where the governing parties are also dominant in the media, what about the role of referendums to reach out to the wider public? Pallingér's contribution explains why the opposition in Hungary has *not* followed such a strategy, pointing to logic of the Hungarian political system. The existing instruments of direct democracy are in the hands of the political elite, as a tool to mobilize their supporters and to crowd out the opposition. This illustrates certain limitations of democratic innovations that could be of relevance to consider in cases outside of Central and Eastern Europe as well.

Deliberative democracy is approached from two different angles in this special issue. On the one hand, it brings empirical evidence according to which the involvement of people in participatory budgeting, one of the most popular forms of deliberation, produces attitude changes in society. On the other hand, it provides a nuanced discussion about reasons for which people stop engaging in citizens' councils and the consequences such a decision has for

the local community. To begin with the first approach, Volodin's article focuses on participatory budgeting, using Ukraine as a case to illustrate the relation between deliberative practices and citizens' trust in political institutions. Even in a critical case like Ukraine, being a hybrid regime, deliberative practices may in fact foster institutional trust among citizens, at least at the local level. Volodin's contribution also underlines the need for fair procedures: as long as the process of participatory budgeting has a clear legal mandate, its results may be perceived as fair, transparent and legitimate. The outcome of participatory budgeting, also in least likely cases, may thus function well as a democratic innovation.

The second approach is illustrated in Schiffbeck's article that seeks to understand why citizens withdraw from a deliberative setting that was praised and brought opportunities for popular involvement in decision-making in a Romanian large city. His findings support those of earlier research conducted in Western Europe, thus illustrating that overall the barriers for democratic innovation are quite similar across countries. There is also empirical evidence about how some context specific factors played a role in the withdrawal of people; these findings are meant to nuance and contribute to the fairly limited literature about causes for defection.

The third form of democratic innovations, the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), is reflected in an article about the potential effects on citizenry. Damnjanović compares the results of three projects from Serbia, which share the assumption that the power of ICTs can improve communication between the government and the citizens and increase, at least to some extent, citizen participation. However, as the Serbian democratic innovations under review demonstrate, neither of these projects can be unequivocally seen as a success, although they fail in different ways and to various degrees. These results are still important to us, as they will help to identify general factors of success

(or failure) of this type of technologically based democratic innovations in a post-communist setting.

**Conclusion**

The discussion above suggests the existence of a discrepancy between the limited scholarly attention paid to democratic innovations and reality in Central and Eastern Europe. The evidence presented in this special issue indicates that three major forms of democratic innovations – direct democracy, deliberative democracy and citizens' involvement with the aid of technology – have been taking place in the region. The countries in the region adopted fairly early in their transition to democracy regulations regarding the existence of democratic innovations. Their existence in practice reflects that some of those regulations were implemented. The general findings of the contributions to this special issue reflect some tendencies that have been already documented for the Western democracies. The logic behind the use of democratic innovations and the consequences produced within the political system or society are fairly similar. In this sense, the general lines along which these are developed is known and Central and Eastern Europe provides supplementary evidence to strengthen existing observations. At the same time, some of these cases provide relevant nuances that enrich our knowledge about the topic. More precisely, they introduce new explanations for the variation in the outcome of democratic innovations. These explanations can be, for example, the importance of the regime like in Hungary and Ukraine or contextual factors like in Moldova, Romania or Serbia.

These observations open the floor for further investigations about other forms of democratic innovations in Central and Eastern Europe. Recently, several countries witnessed the emergence of citizens' initiatives, one form of direct democracy, and of mini-publics, a

popular form of deliberative democracy, as means to promote citizens' engagement in politics. At local level, an increasing number of democratic innovations emerged and developed throughout the entire region. The latter remains a fertile soil for future investigation especially with the new obstacles to representative democracy raused by some of the national governments.

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